Volition

An Introduction to the Law of KAMMA

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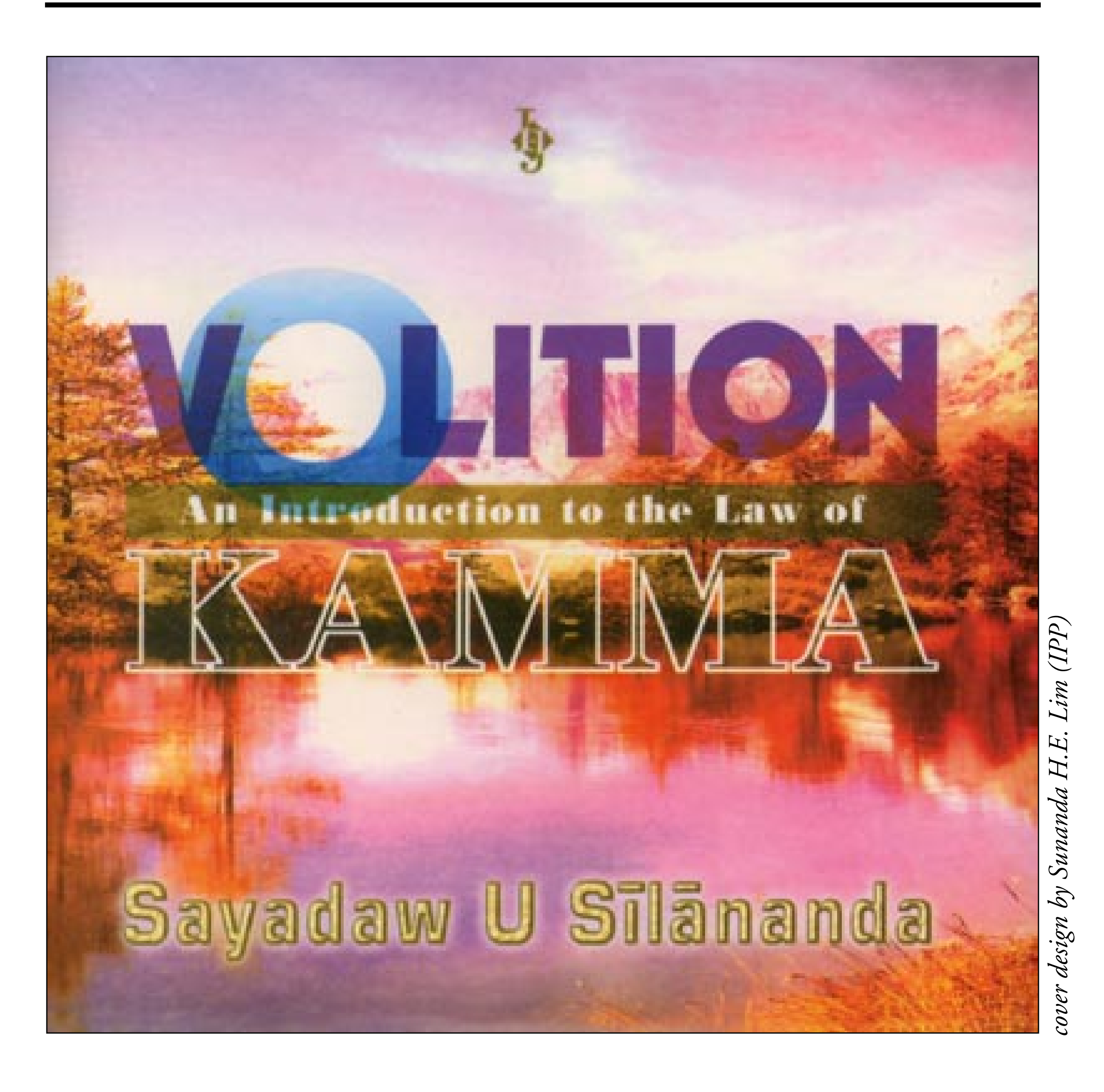
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Preface

WHAT IS *kamma*? Buddha said: "Oh monks, it is volition that I call *kamma*."

The popular meaning of kamma is action or doing, but as a technical term, kamma means volition or will. When you do something, there is volition behind it, and that volition, that mental effort, is called kamma. Buddha explained that, having willed, one then acts through body, speech, and mind. Whatever you do, there is some kind of kamma, mental effort, will, and volition. Volition is one of the fifty-two mental states which arise together with consciousness.

If you are unfamiliar with the term kamma, then this booklet, *Volition, An Introduction to the Law of Kamma* – a Dhamma talk given by a well-known Burmese Buddhist monk, Sayadaw U Sīlānanda to students of Vipassana meditation and Abhidhamma from 1984 to 1988, in America – might be for you.

Sayadaw U Sīlānanda is the Abbot of the Dhammananda Vihara, Half Moon Bay, California, and the Spiritual Director of Dhammachakka Meditation Center, Theravada Buddhist Society of America and Tathagata Meditation Center, having been chosen by the renowned Burmese meditation master, the Most Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, to teach in America and spread the Dhamma in the West.

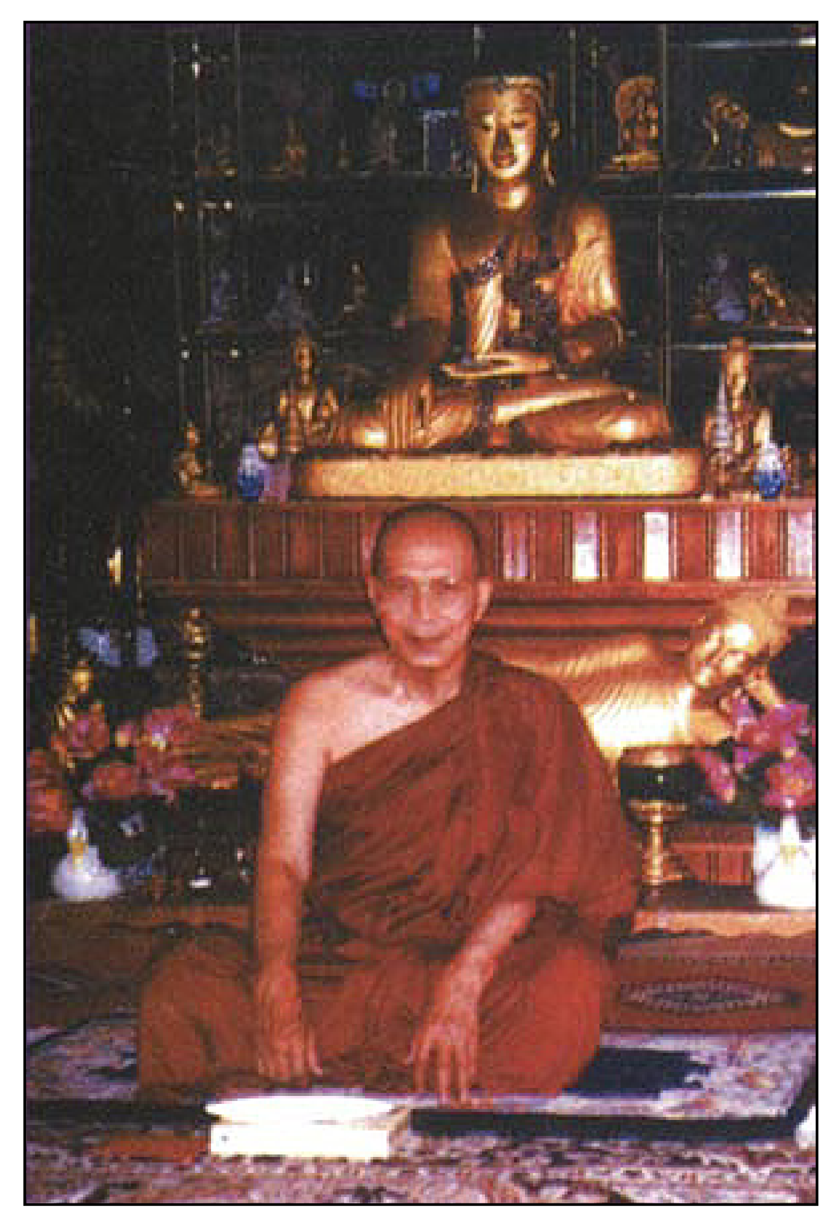
Sayadaw has been a Buddhist monk since 1947. He holds two *Dhammācariya* (Master of Dhamma) degrees and has taught at the Atithokdayone Pāḷi University and

was an External Examiner at the Department of Oriental Studies, University of Art and Sciences, Mandalay, Myanmar. Sayadaw was the chief compiler of the comprehensive *Tipiṭaka Pāḷi-Burmese Dictionary* and one of the final editors of the Pāḷi Texts, Commentaries, and Sub-Commentaries at the Sixth Buddhist Council, held in 1954.

Sayadaw is the author of seven scholarly Buddhist books in the Burmese language and an English publication on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, in 1990.

Since his arrival in America in 1979, Sayadaw has been teaching *Vipassanā* (Insight) meditation, *Abhidhamma* (Buddhist psychology), and other aspects of Theravāda Buddhism, and leading meditation retreats throughout the country and in Japan, Europe and Asia. Sayadaw is actively engaged in teaching a broad range of students in English, Burmese, Pāḷi and Sanskrit. Sayadaw is loved by his students as a skilled, patient and compassionate teacher.





Sayadaw U Sīlānanda

I see me smiling in your eyes
But, you see me smiling in your heart
A quiet pond reflects the great forest of life
Deeds touch its heart that cannot disregard

– Sabrina Ooi

The Law of Kamma

The subject of this lecture is the law of kamma. Many people who are not born as Buddhists are attracted to Buddhism by the doctrine of kamma because it explains such phenomena as the individual differences among human beings and also why good people suffer in this life.

I know of an Italian man. He pondered a great deal about the inequalities and individual differences among human beings. He was thinking about these things, asked many people about them, but did not get a satisfactory answer. One day, he took hold of a book on Buddhism and read about the law of kamma. When he read about the law of kamma, he was very satisfied with the explanations given according to that law. He decided to study more about Buddhism and then went to the East to receive ordination. He became a Buddhist monk and died at the age of eighty as a Buddhist monk. He was initially attracted to Buddhism by the doctrine of kamma.

Kamma is not moral justice. If one takes it as moral justice, then one suggests that someone is sitting in judgement over beings. There is no one who makes judgements over the doings of beings; there is just the moral law of kamma. Just as kamma is not moral judgement, so it is not reward and punishment. According to the law of kamma, if you do good deeds, you get good results, and if you do bad deeds, you get bad results. However, these good and bad results are

not given by anyone and are not given as reward and punishment. Kamma is a moral law which needs no lawgiver, a law which operates naturally.

The inequalities among human beings – the individual differences between people – has troubled many thinkers in the past as well as in the present.

During the time of the Buddha, there lived a brahman named Todeyya. He was a very rich man, a millionaire. But he did not believe in generosity, in giving. He said, "If you give, then you become poor; so don't give anything away." He was so stingy that he became a millionaire, and he died a millionaire. But he was so attached to his riches that, after death, he was reborn as a dog in his own house.

One day, the Buddha went to that house, and the dog saw him and barked at him. The Budhha replied: "Oh, Todeyya! You showed disrespect when you were a human being, and nowyou show disrespect by barking at me. You will be reborn in hell." When the Buddha said that, the dog thought, "Oh, recluse Gautama knows me," and he was so distressed that he went to a heap of ashes and lay down on them.

The brahman had a son named Subha, and the dog, his father, was his favorite. He had a special place for the dog, but when he saw that the dog had gone to the heap of ashes, Subha was alarmed. He was told that Gautama had said something to the dog which depressed the animal. So he went to the Buddha and asked him about it. The Buddha told him what happened.

Subha said to himself: "According to the teachings of the brahmans, my father should have been reborn as a Brahma. But Gautama has told me that he was reborn as a dog. Gautama speaks heedlessly." He went back to the Buddha to argue with him. The Buddha asked him whether or not there were some riches not disclosed by his father, and Subha replied that, indeed, a great deal of money was missing and had not been disclosed by his father. Buddha told him to feed the dog late at night near bedtime and then ask the dog where the riches were.

Subha thought that if what the Buddha said were true, he could recover the riches, and if what he said were false, he could accuse the Buddha of falsehood.

Subha fed the dog at bedtime and asked him about the undisclosed riches. The dog got up and took him to the place where the riches were hidden. Subha dug up the treasure and recovered it.

Subha then went to the Buddha and asked him why people are different from each other, why some have long lives, while others have short lives. He also asked why some people are sickly and prone to disease, while others are healthy; why some are ugly, while others are beautiful; why some have few friends, while others have many; why some are rich, while others are poor; why some are born in favourable circumstances, while others are not; and why some are born with much intelligence, while others are dull-witted.

The Buddha answered his questions: "Oh, young man! Beings are owners of their deed, heirs of their deeds, have deeds as their parents, their kin, their ref-

uge. Deeds divide beings in lowness and excellence." Buddha gave this very short answer, but Subha did not understand. So Buddha elaborated upon the law of kamma.

Some beings like to kill other beings and get in the habit of killing. After death, these people are reborn in four lower, woeful states – animal world, ghost world, demon world, and hell. But if they are reborn as human beings, their lives are short. Those who do not kill beings, who have compassion for them, may be reborn in the *deva* (celestial being) world. If they are reborn as human beings, they have long lives.

The Buddha then explained about sickness and health. Some people cause injury to other beings; they like to inflict injury on others. On account of that, they are reborn in four woeful states. But if they are reborn as human beings, they are sickly and prone to disease. Those who do not cause injury to others are reborn as *devas*, or if they are reborn as human beings, they are endowed with good health.

Why are some people ugly, while others are beautiful? The Buddha explained that some people become angry very easily, and owing to this anger, they are reborn in four woeful states. But if they are reborn as human beings, they are ugly. (Anger makes you look ugly, so when you are angry, look at yourself in the mirror and see how beautiful or ugly you are.) But some people have no anger, do not become angry easily, and have thoughts of loving kindness, or *mettā*, towards people. These people are reborn as *devas*, or if they are reborn as human beings, they are beautiful.

So if you want to be beautiful, at least in the next life, check your anger – don't get angry!

Why do some people have no friends, while others have many? Some people are jealous, and on account of that jealousy, they are reborn in the four woeful states. But if they are reborn as human beings, they have few or no friends. Those who are not jealous are reborn as *devas*, or if they are reborn as human beings, they have many good friends. We can say, according to the law of kamma, that those who cannot have friends were jealous in a past life.

Why are some people rich, while others are poor? Some people are stingy; they do not want to give anything. By being stingy, by not being generous, they may be reborn in four woeful states. But if they are reborn as human beings, they are poor. Those who are giving and generous become rich people. So if you want to become rich, give!

The Buddha also explained why some people are born into good circumstances, while others are born into unfortunate circumstances. Some people are very proud, look down on other people, and have little respect for others. On account of this false pride, such people are reborn in four woeful states, but if they are reborn as human beings, they are born into unfortunate circumstances. Those who have no false pride, who have humility, are reborn as *devas*, unless they are reborn as human beings, in which case they are born in favorable circumstances.

Why are some people dull-witted, while others are intelligent? Buddha explained that some people have

no desire for knowledge, no desire to ask questions, no desire to know about the nature of things. With no knowledge of right conduct, these unknowing people perform wrong actions and thus may be reborn in four woeful states. If they are reborn as human beings, they are dull-witted. Those who desire knowledge, who ask questions about the nature of things, are reborn in the *deva* world. But if they are reborn as human beings, they are intelligent. So if you want to be intelligent in the next life, don't hesitate to ask questions. I don't need to tell you to ask questions, especially you American people. You ask many questions, and it is a good thing.

The Buddha gave these answers to Subha's questions. From the law of kamma, we can infer about a person's past lives. Buddha said that beings are owners of their deeds, owners of their kamma. Kamma alone is their property; nothing else is. Kamma is a very important subject in Buddhism.



What is *kamma*? Buddha said: "Oh monks, it is volition that I call *kamma*." The popular meaning of kamma is action or doing, but as a technical term, kamma means volition or will. When you do something, there is volition behind it, and that volition, that mental effort, is called kamma. Buddha explained that, having willed, one then acts through body, speech and mind. Whatever you do, there is some kind of kamma, mental

effort, will and volition. Volition is one of the fifty-two mental states which arise together with consciousness.

When you do something, such as make an offering to the Buddha, there is volition which prompts you to give, and that volition is called kamma. Thus, kamma is the cause, not the effect. Some people say that kamma means the cause, the deeds, and also the effects. But in Theravāda Buddhism, kamma never means the effect or the result. Kamma means only the cause.

Kamma belongs to the mental aggregates. There are five aggregates: materiality, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Volition belongs to the aggregate of formations. The aggregate of formations is mental, and just as other mental states, it lasts only a very short moment. It comes into being, stays only a little bit of time, and then passes away. But volition is different from other mental states in that it has the ability to leave some potential. When it dies, it does not disappear altogether. It leaves something, some power or potential to give results, when circumstances favor those results to appear. One does kamma here and now, but the results may be in this life, the next life, or in some life after the next life.

Kamma or volition has potential to give results, and this potential is a tremendous force. Kamma does not end with the demise of the present life; it goes on and on. But we cannot say that kamma is stored somewhere in our body or consciousness because everything is impermanent and must be continually changing. Kamma is likewise impermanent and so disappears, but it leaves a potential in the continuity

of beings so that, when circumstances are favorable for results to appear, those results appear.

Once again, kamma is not stored anywhere, but when it disappears, it leaves a potential for results. Similarly, a tree can be said to have the potential to give fruits. There are no fruits in the trees at first, but when the opportune times arises, fruits appear.

Another illustration we can use is that of the old Buddhist simile of the sun, cow dung, and gem (gem is like a magnifying glass). When there is sun, and when you put a magnifying glass on the dried cow dung, you get fire. One cannot say that the new fire was stored in the cow dung, or in the sun, or in the magnifying glass. But when these things come together, we have a fire. The circumstances were favorable for the fire to appear. Likewise, the results of kamma.

Kamma and its results are not the same thing. It is not the case that kamma gradually matures into results. One kind of Hindu philosophy teaches that the result is already in the kamma in unmanifested form, and the kamma matures itself into the result. So cause and effect are essentially the same in that philosophy. But Buddhism does not accept that. Buddhism teaches that kamma and result are void of one another, although no results exist without kamma. The results depend on kamma entirely, but the results do not exist within kamma, nor does kamma persist within the results. Kamma and results belong to different times. The results are born wholly depending on kamma done in the past, and when circumstances combine in

a way that is favorable for the results to appear (like sun, dung and gem), results will appear.

The technical name for results of kamma is *vipāka*, which we call the fruit of kamma. Kamma or volition from the past leaves a potential for the fruits or *vipāka* to arise in the present. But the past kamma does not influence present volition. A person's reaction to past results will either produce good or bad results for the future, depending on the nature of the volition. If they react with what we call wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*), the result or fruit will be good in the future. But if they react with unwise attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*), the results or fruit of such volition will be bad in the future. So you cannot do much about the fruits of past kamma, but you can react to those fruits with wise attention and thus have good results in the future. Wise attention will allow you to do good kamma, while unwise attention will cause you to do bad kamma. The future results or fruit will depend on your volition (*kamma*), in the present.

Not everything, however, is due to kamma. Sometimes we are wont to say that everything is due to kamma, that "it is your kamma and you have to bear this and that because of it." Although kamma is a law governing the whole universe, it is only one of the laws. Other natural and psychic laws also govern the life of beings.

In addition, we must distinguish between the results of past kamma and present kamma. Present kamma is not the result of past kamma. The result of past kamma is resultant consciousness known as

vipāka. The resultant consciousness is the result of past kamma, but that resultant consciousness does not influence the performance of the *kusala* (wholesome) or *akusala* (unwholesome) acts of the present. *Kusala* or *akusala* kamma is not the result of past kamma; rather, you are accumulating fresh kamma in the present life, and that will give results in the future.



Kamma is classified into different groups and different kinds. One of the classifications of kamma is into good kamma and bad kamma. There are ten good kammas, ten good volitions or deeds. They are good because they appear with good mental states, good mental components, and they give good results.

The first good kamma is generosity, or giving. We have to practice generosity because by giving what we have to others, we acquire *kusala*, also known as merit. This *kusala kamma* will give results in future lives. Generosity also helps us practice detachment. For example, I may be attached to this tape recorder. If I give it away to another person, I not only give up the machine, but I also give up attachment to it. I get rid of attachment, known as *lobha*, and when your mind is free from *lobha*, it is liberated, clear, and tranquil. Thus, people are encouraged to practice giving (*dāna*) as often as possible.

The second good kamma is morality. Morality means taking precepts and keeping them. For lay

Buddhists, five precepts are the minimum requirement: not to kill, not to steal, not to indulge in sexual misconduct, not to lie, and not to take intoxicants. On retreats, we add three more precepts for a total of eight. The additional three are abstention from eating after noon, from music and adornments, and from high and luxurious beds and seats. Morality, known as *sīla*, is the foundation of *samādhi*, or meditation.

The third good kamma is meditation, mental culture. This is the best kamma you can do in this life: to practice *vipassanā* meditation.

The fourth good kamma is reverence, giving respect to others, especially to older people. In the East, it is taken for granted that younger people give respect to older people. In this way, the relationship between parents and children, and teachers and students, are governed by rules of reverence.

The fifth good kamma is service, to do something good for someone, such as helping a lady cross the street or helping her carry some heavy things. Another type of service is giving service to the Buddha, to the Dhamma, and to the Sangha. When you are cleaning or renovating the monastery, that is very good service.

The sixth good kamma is the sharing of merit. When you have acquired some merit, you must share this merit with other beings. Sharing of merit is itself merit, and we share merit with all beings. Sharing of merit does not mean that we give a portion of our merit to other beings. It means that we let them get a chance to acquire merit themselves. Once a man asked Pacceka Buddha whether the merit decreases if a per-

son shares it with other people. The Pacceka Buddha told him: "If you have a candle, and if you light another candle from the lighted one, the light of the first candle does not decrease when it lights the other one. Actually it becomes brighter with the help of the newly lit candle. In the same way, when you share merit, your merit does not decrease but actually increases because you get new merit."

The seventh good kamma is rejoicing at another's merit. This means saying, "*Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu,*" which means "well done" when others do meritorious deeds. When other people share merit with you, you say, "*Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.*" This means that you rejoice at their merit, and by rejoicing at their merit, you get merit yourself.

The eighth good kamma is listening to the Dhamma. This is good merit, a good deed. By listening to the Dhamma, you will come to know the Dhamma, and when you come to know the Dhamma, you can avoid doing unwholesome acts and do wholesome acts instead.

And related to the eighth good kamma is the ninth, speaking on the Dhamma, giving talks on the Dhamma. So we are both doing good kamma right now.

The tenth and last good kamma is called the straightening of one's view. This means that one has the knowledge that kamma is entirely one's own property, that we alone are the owner of our deeds, and that no one else is responsible for our actions, our kamma.

Thus we have these ten good kammas. Actually, they can be categorized into three: generosity, morality, and meditation.

1. Paying respect and service are included in morality (*sīla*);
2. Sharing of merit and rejoicing at another's merit are included in generosity (*dāna*); and
3. Listening to the Dhamma, talking on the Dhamma, and straightening of one's views can be classified under meditation, or mental culture (*bhāvanā*).

Let us now look at the bad kammas. Bad kammas are those deeds which give bad results, deeds which go with unwholesome mental states.

The first of these bad kammas is killing, the killing of beings.

The second is stealing, taking what is not given.

The third is sexual misconduct.

Fourth is telling lies.

Fifth is slandering, backbiting.

Sixth is harsh language, harsh speech, words of abuse – all bad kamma.

Seventh is frivolous talk, fruitless talk which has no value or meaning.

Number eight is covetousness, which is wanting to possess another person's property. In Pāḷi, we call this *Visama lobha*, which means distorted greed. This is not the greed you have for your own property.

Covetousness here means that you want to possess another person's property, and this is a very bad form of greed.

The ninth form of bad kamma is ill will, or *dosa*. That is wanting to hurt people, wanting to cause injury to others.

Finally, we come to the tenth bad kamma, which is wrong view. Wrong view is having the belief that things are permanent, satisfactory, and one is in possession of a soul or self.

These are the ten bad kammas which give bad results and which we must avoid if we do not want those results. Refraining from these kammas is said to be good kamma; refraining from killing, stealing, and all the other bad kammas is actually good kamma. We must have knowledge of the law of kamma, the knowledge that kamma is entirely one's responsibility. This is very important in Buddhism and is part of the good kamma we call the straightening of view.

Knowledge of kamma is conducive to tranquility, which is one of the seven factors of enlightenment. In order to experience tranquility, one has to do many things, and reflecting upon kamma as one's own is one of them. Sometimes you are agitated and restless because you do not have what you want, or you have what you do not want. In such a situation, reflecting upon kamma will help you to be rid of restlessness and thereby gain tranquility because you cannot do anything to change kamma from the past. You have to put up with what you deserve as the result of past volition, past kamma.

Reflecting upon kamma is a good way of getting rid of resentment. Sometimes when you practice loving-kindness meditation, you ironically begin to feel resentment because you are being asked to send thoughts of loving kindness to someone who is, perhaps, hateful to you. One way to get rid of the resentment is to reflect upon kamma as your own. You reflect:

> "I am reborn here as the result of my own kamma, and the other person is reborn here for the same reason, and there is nothing I can do about it. But by being resentful towards the person, I am accomplishing new *akusala kamma*, which will give me bad results in the four woeful states."

By so reflecting upon kamma, one can get rid of resentment.

Knowledge of kamma also promotes self-reliance. Since kamma is your own, you are the architect of your life. You must rely on yourself, not on others, to get good results; you must do good kamma yourself. Since beings get results according to their kamma, no one can help another in getting those results. In addition to teaching self-reliance, knowledge of kamma teaches a sense of individual responsibility. We are responsible for ourselves, and whatever we have or have made in this life, we alone are responsible for it. When we meet with good circumstances, it is a result of what we have done in the past. In the same way, when we find ourselves in unfavorable circumstances, we are responsible.

So if you want to get good results, then you need only do good kamma in this life. In this way, knowledge of kamma gives consolation and hope because we can rely on ourselves to shape our future lives by doing good kamma here. Thus kamma is not fate or destiny, for we can avoid the results of bad kamma by doing good kamma in this life. We do not have to be afraid of anyone who sits in judgement over us or of anyone who can send us to hell. According to Buddhism, no one can send us to hell but ourselves, but we can also send ourselves to the *deva* world.

Knowledge of and belief in the law of kamma is a basic requirement for a Buddhist. Tanungpulu Sayadaw has stressed this point. With this belief and knowledge, one does meritorious deeds, and these meritorious deeds are the best meritorious deeds if they are done with knowledge of kamma and its results in mind. If you invoke the knowledge of kamma when you do meritorious deeds, then your deeds are said to have three wholesome roots, which are non-attachment, non-anger, and non-delusion. When your meritorious deeds are accompanied by three wholesome roots, they will give results in future lives, and you will be reborn as a person endowed with those roots. Those born with the three wholesome roots are able to attain *jhāna* or *Nibbāna* in their present life. Thus it is very important to have knowledge of kamma in us at the time of doing meritorious deeds.



Questions and Answers

Q: *Is the intention of sharing merit to inspire others to gain merit for themselves?*

A: Yes. When you are glad at the meritorious deeds of other people, that gladness itself is a meritorious deed. This sharing of meritorious deeds is most effective for persons who have departed. For example, a person dies and is reborn as a hungry ghost, a *peta*. If other people, relatives, do meritorious deeds and share them with the ghost (by saying: "let the ghost come here and rejoice at our meritorious deeds"), then the ghost, by hearing that and rejoicing at those deeds, can get good results immediately. The *peta* gets results immediately, but we in this life do not get results so soon.

There is a story of the relatives of the King Bimbisara of India who became a disciple of Buddha and attained the first stage of sainthood. In his past life, he had many relatives who did an evil deed. Some people were preparing to offer some food to the *sangha* headed by Buddha, and Bimbisara's relatives helped themselves dishonestly to some of it. On account of that, they were reborn as hungry ghosts who could not get enough shelter and nourishment. Bimbisara offered food to the Buddha, and the hungry ghost expected Bimbisara to share merit with them. But Bimbisara did not know about sharing merit, and the ghost got noth-

ing. This angered them, and they showed fearful appearances to the king during the night. He told the Buddha about this the next morning, and the Buddha advised Bimbisara to share merit with his relatives when doing meritorious deeds. Bimbisara followed the advice and specifically dedicated his share of merit to them. They said, *"Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu,"* and they got good results immediately.

Q: *Can we escape the results of bad kamma?*

A: There are different kammas. Some give results in the next life; some in lives after that. The ones that gives results in future lives are a store of kamma, which everyone has. We have gone through this *saṁsāra* (rounds of rebirth) for many aeons, and we have done good things and bad things. Some of the kammas may have given results, but some may have not yet given results. Both good and bad kammas are, in a way, waiting for a chance to give results. Bad kammas give results when they favorable opportunities, favorable circumstances to give results. If you do bad kamma here, then bad kamma from the past is more likely to give results by your doing new bad kamma. But if you do good kamma here and now, you can block, but not eradicate totally, the bad kamma from the past. That is why people are asked to do meritorious deeds.

Buddha once put this in the form of a simile. If you put a spoonful of salt in a cup of water, that water becomes very salty. But if you put the same

amount of salt in a lake, that water will not be very salty. In this way, when you have a large amount of good kamma, you can counteract or dilute the effects of bad kamma.

Only when you attain *arahantship* (*Arahant* – one who has attained the highest level of spiritual development, who is free and will not be reborn again) can you completely eradicate the effects of kamma altogether. But we can block the effects of bad kamma here, by doing good deeds. By doing good deeds, we make circumstances unfavorable for the bad kamma from the past to give results.

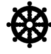
Q: *Are results and actions actually separate stages of consciousness?*

A: They are separate mental states according to the *Abhidhamma*. We have four realities: consciousness, mental states, materiality, and *Nibbāna*. The mental states appear together at the same time with consciousness, and kamma is one of those mental states. Consciousness accompanies the mental state of kamma. Both disappear, but kamma is a mental state which leaves a potential to give results in the future.

Q: *Do negative mental states, such as anger and ill will, always give bad results?*

A: Yes, but the results vary in degree according to the intensity of the ill will or hatred. Sometimes the thought of ill will or anger is very small, very fleet-

ing, and the results will not be very pronounced. But sometimes the intensity is so great that you may actually kill someone and then get very bad results. It is said in the books that killing a cow is worse than killing a dog or a cat, because to kill a cow takes more effort, since it is bigger. When the being killed is immoral, then you get less bad results. If a person kills one who is very evil, the *akusala* will not be as bad as if one were to kill a virtuous person. So according to the *sīla* of the person killed, and according to the effort required to kill, the results vary. There are different degrees of *kusala* and *akusala kamma* which give varying degrees of corresponding results.



Understanding of the Law of Kamma

I would like to give the reader the definitions of some terms I will be using in this part of the lecture. These definitions can also be found in *Buddhist Dictionary*[1] by Nyanatiloka.

By *citta*, I mean consciousness. There are 89 types of consciousness (or 121 by a different reckoning). By *cetasika*, I refer to mental factors or mental concomitants which are bound up with the simultaneously arising consciousness (*citta*) and conditioned by its presence. Another term, *rūpa*, means form, matter or corporeality. The *Abhidhamma* describes all phenomena in these three aspects: ***citta***, ***cetasikas***, and ***rūpa***. Of these three aspects, the mental factors comprise feeling, perception, and 50 mental formations; altogether 52 mental concomitants.

Another term I will use is *cetanā*. *Cetanā*, which means volition or will, is one of the seven *cetasikas* inseparably bound up with all consciousness. These seven *cetasikas* are sensorial or mental impression (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), volition (*cetanā*), concentration (*ekaggatā*), vitality (*jīvita*), and advertence (*manasikāra*).

Finally, I will explain one more term. Although I am using the Pāḷi form of the word, kamma, you probably already know the Sanskrit form of the word, which is *karma*. In Pāḷi, the conjunct consonants are

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1 Buddhist Publications Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka; 1980.

assimilated or simplified, and so *'r"* and *"m"* become *"mm"*. But both words mean exactly the same thing.

What is ***Kamma***? Kamma is explained as an action or deed. Basically, kamma means work or job or action or deed, but in the Buddhist sense, kamma is defined as that by which actions are done or that through which actions are done. The actions themselves are not called kamma.

When we do something, there arises in our mind a type of consciousness, and that type of consciousness is accompanied by what we call volition, *cetanā* and that *cetanā* is called ***Kamma***. Buddha explicitly said:

> "Volition (*cetanā*) I call Kamma. Through volition, one performs action by body, by speech, or by mind."

Whatever action we do, there arises in our minds a type of consciousness, either wholesome or unwholesome, and that type of consciousness is accompanied by volition, by *cetanā*, and that *cetanā* is what we call kamma. So kamma is the volition in our minds, the volition associated with wholesome and unwholesome *cittas*. Volition (*cetanā*) accompanies every type of consciousness; it is one of the seven *cetasikas* bound up with all 89 or 121 types of consciousness. But by kamma, we mean the *cetanā* which accompanies only the wholesome and unwholesome types of consciousness. So ***cetanā*** accompanying the wholesome or unwholesome ***cittas*** is called kamma.

You may be familiar with the twelve links of the Dependent Origination, and there you will find the

term *saṅkhāra*, which means mental formations. Mental formations really means kamma here, and it is this kamma which produces results in this life or in future lives. Thus we have the chain: on ignorance depend kamma-formations; on kamma-formations depends consciousness; on consciousness depend mind and matter; on mind and matter depend six sense bases; on six sense bases depends contact; on contact depends feeling; on feeling depends craving; on craving depends clinging; on clinging depends the process of becoming; on the process of becoming depends rebirth; and on rebirth depend old age and death.

Before going further, I would like to mention that kamma is not the result of action, but the cause, although in common usage we use the word in the sense of meaning results. Kamma is also not fate or predestination, although in some senses it seems to be. Kamma is not fate in the sense of being something imposed on us by an external agent; but it is a significant determinant of our life and future lives.

One more thing that should not be applied to the doctrine of kamma is the idea of mass kamma or collective kamma. There is no operation of a collective kamma affecting a group of people. There may be, however, a group of people who do something together and who get the results of their individual kamma together. In that case, the results of each individual kamma is operating.

The law of kamma is a law of cause and effect which states that where there is cause, there is effect; no effect comes into being without a cause. We might

also describe kamma as a law of action and reaction: when there is action, there is reaction.

The workings of kamma are a natural law, like law of gravitation. Nobody can interfere with this law, not even the Buddha. We have an old story[2] of how Buddha could not save his relatives from being killed; He could not prevent them from being subject to the effects of their kamma.

The first factor in the Noble Eightfold Path is Right Understanding. One of the basic requirements of Right Understanding is an understanding of the law of kamma.

Is everything due to kamma? In the *Buddhist Dictionary*, Venerable Nyanatiloka writes: "Totally wrong is the belief that, according to Buddhism, everything is the result of previous action." Any kammically wholesome or unwholesome volitional action is not the result of former action because it is the action itself; that is, volition is not influenced by the results of past kamma.

There are several categories of *cittas*, of consciousness. One of the types of *cittas* is called resultant. Resultant consciousness is the result of kamma, but other types of consciousness are not the result of kamma. So not everything is due to kamma.

For example, we see something desirable, and that seeing consciousness is caused by kamma. But our reaction to that seeing or to that object is not caused by kamma. Our reaction is a new kamma that we perform. Seeing a desirable object is a result of good kam-

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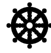
2 *See* **Buddhist Legends**, Part 2, pp. 30-46; Pali Text Society's edition.

ma; seeing an undesirable object is the result of bad kamma. If we see a beautiful rose, that is the result of good kamma. The rose is not the result of kamma – it is just a natural object. But the consciousness that sees this rose is the result of good kamma. Then comes your reaction. If you have attachment to the rose, then your reaction is unwholesome (*akusala*); if your reaction is to see the true nature of the rose – that it is impermanent, without a soul, and subject to the laws of rise and fall – then your reaction is not to get attached to it, which is wholesome (*kusala*). That reaction is either *kusala* or *akusala* and will give results in the future. Whatever you come across in this life is the result of kamma in the past, but your reaction to it is not the result. Your reaction is a new kamma.

Who is the doer of kamma? Who enjoys or experiences the results of kamma? This is very difficult to explain because Buddhism does not accept a person or being or *Ātman* (in Pāḷi: *atta* meaning self or soul) inside the person. Yet we say that if you do good deeds, you get good results in the future, and so on. The way to explain this seeming paradox is to say that Buddhism accepts both identity and diversity. There is continuity but not identical mind and matter existing for a long time. At every moment, new mind and matter arise and disappear. So there is something like continuity but what is not identical to what existed before; nothing from this moment is taken over to the next moment.

Thus, in the ultimate analysis, there is no doer of kamma and no experiencer of results because there is

no doer over and above the doing, no experiencer of the results over and above the occurrence of the result. Apart from the action, we see no one we call an agent of the action. In conventional language, of course, we have to say that beings get results of good kamma or bad kamma, but the term "being" is just a mode of usage, used for convenience.



Classification of Kamma

Kamma can be classified according to function, priority of result, time of taking place of result, and place in which result takes place.

The first division is according to function:

1. Reproductive kamma,
2. Supportive kamma,
3. Obstructive kamma, and
4. Destructive kamma.

Reproductive kamma means kamma which produces results.

Supportive kamma does not produce results but supports the results of another kamma.

Obstructive kamma is something like supportive kamma – but in the opposite sense; it can interfere with the result of other kamma.

Destructive kamma is one that destroys the result of other kamma. All of these kammas may be good or bad, *kusala* or *akusala*.

With respect to priority of result, we have:

1. Weighty,
2. Proximate,
3. Habitual, and
4. Reserve kamma.

Weighty kamma is very serious kamma. Weighty *akusala kamma* would be some act such as killing your father or mother; on the wholesome or *kusala* side, it is the attainment of *jhāna* (higher states of meditative consciousness). If you kill your parents, you are sure

to be reborn in the lowest of the hells; if you die with *jhāna* state of meditation intact, you will be reborn in the *Brahma* world.

Proximate kamma is that done at the moment of death.

Habitual kamma is the kamma which one does habitually in life, such as practicing meditation every day or performing some *akusala* action every day.

Reserve kamma is that which will give results when the other three are not present.

Now, when there is weighty and proximate kamma, then weighty kamma will give results in the next life. When there is proximate and habitual, the proximate will give results. If there is habitual and reserve, the habitual will give results. Proximate kamma is very important because the kamma done at the last moments before death determines the immediate rebirth. There is a story of an evil man who hunted animals all his life. For killing so many beings, he was going to be reborn in a woeful state. But his son was an *Arahant* and helped him in the last moments before death to attain a better rebirth.

With respect to the time of taking place, we have kamma which gives results in:

1. the present life,
2. the next life, and
3. some lifetime after that.

In this category we have another kamma called defunct kamma, kamma which has passed its time of giving results. But the kamma which gives results in lives after the present life and in lives after the next life

can never become defunct as long as there is continuity of rebirth and death. The kammas which give results in the present life and in the next life never can become defunct if they do not give results during respective periods, due to unfavorable periods, due to unfavorable circumstances. But the kamma giving results in lives after the next life never becomes defunct as long as one does not escape from the always sentiment beings. That is why animals have a chance to be reborn as human beings, even though most of what they do in the animal did in the past may have a chance to give results, and so the animal can escape from being an animal or from being in a worse woeful state.

The final classification of kamma is by place where results can occur. Kamma gives results in the various sphere, and the formless sphere. For example, unwholesome kamma gives results in the four woeful states and in human beings and even in some celestial beings. Wholesome kamma pertaining to the sense sphere gives in every kind of existence.

What are the results of kamma? Only two things are the result of kamma. One is *cittas* and *cetasikas*; the other is *rūpa*, material properties.

The resultant types of consciousness and the *cetasikas* going along with them are the results of kamma. Some, but not all, material properties in our bodies are also caused by kamma. Thus, when we say what the results of kamma are, we mean this: the material properties caused by kamma. A rose is not the result of kamma; it is simply there, depending on natural causes. But the seeing of it or the experiencing of

it – the seeing consciousness by which you see the rose – is caused by kamma. And the eye, or rather the eye-sensitivity with which you see is also the result of kamma. Your reaction to the rose is not a result of kamma. In this way, there is the result of kamma and a new kamma and then there will be the result of this new kamma again later. In this way, cause and effect go on and on and on.

The law of kamma states that beings get what they deserve, but that does not mean that we are not to help people, that we are not to relieve people from suffering. As much as we can, we must do whatever we can to relieve suffering, but if we cannot eliminate suffering any more, we must understand the cause of the suffering as kamma and cultivate compassion.

Compassion or *karuṇā* is a good quality to cultivate, but while cultivating *karuṇā*, we may cross over into anger. For example, some people want to help the animals being used in laboratories for experiments. While helping those animals, some are also cultivating anger and hatred at the people doing the experiments. When we practice *karuṇā*, we have to be careful not to cultivate unwholesome states. If we have hatred, we are not practicing *karuṇā* any longer.

I would like to complete this part of the lecture with an illustration of a thought process and the place of in it.

This is the mango simile, and I will number each part of the process.

> A certain man with his head covered went to sleep at the foot of a fruiting mango tree (0). Then a ripe mango loosened from the stalk fell to the ground, grazing his ear (1, 2, 3). Awakened by that sound (4), he opened his eyes and looked (5). Stretching out his hand, he took the fruit (6), squeezed it (7), smelt it (8), ate it with enjoyment (9-15), and swallowed it (16-17). Then he went to sleep (0).

There are seventeen thought moments or *cittas* when an object is presented to the mind through one of the five sense doors, as in the case of this mango simile.

We have the life continuum (*bhavanga*) (0, 1, 2, 3), a type of undercurrent or inactive consciousness, and we have a series of the following types of thought consciousness sense-door adverting (4); seeing (5); receiving (6); investigating (7); determining (8); apperception or impulsion (9-15); registering (16-17); and then *bhavanga* again (0).

The thought-moments in which kamma is performed are seven moments of apperception or impulsion, known in Pāḷi as *javana*. In these moments, one experiences the object fully, and they are the moments when one creates kamma. In the first of these seven thought moments, one acquires kamma which, getting favorable circumstances, gives results in the present life. In the seventh and last thought-moment of *javana*, one acquires kamma which gives results in the next life. In the five thought-moments in between, one ac-

quires kamma which gives results in the lives after the present and next life, that is, from the third lifetime onward reckoning the present life as the first.

If the first *javana* does not give results in this life, it becomes defunct; if the seventh *javana* does not give results in the next life, it becomes defunct. But the five *javanas* between the first and seventh can give results through every lifetime until one dies as an *arahant*. Therefore the seven moments of *javana* – when you do *kusala* or *akusala* kamma – are the most important moments in the thought process of the Abhidhamma. In those moments, how we react to the object (either in a wholesome or unwholesome manner), produces results which we will have to be responsible for in the future.



Other Books by Sayadaw U Sīlānanda

"Monks, learn the Āṭānāṭiya protection, study the Āṭānāṭiya protection, hold in your hearts the Āṭānāṭiya protection. Monks, beneficial is the Āṭānāṭiya protection for security, protection, freedom from harm and living in ease for monks, nuns (bhikkhunis) and male and female lay followers."

~ The Buddha

With these words the Buddha exhorted His monks to learn the Āṭānāṭiya protection for their protection and thus began the tradition of chanting the Sutta for protection and good results. The collection presented in this book – **Paritta Pāḷi & Protective Verses, *A Collection of Eleven Protective Suttas & An English Translation*** (IJ014/98) – is by Sayadaw U Sīlānanda, the well-known Burmese monk who was one of the final editors of the Pāḷi Texts, Commentaries, and Sub-Commentaries at the 6th Buddhist Council, held in 1954. This book contains all the popular Buddhist discourses, the eleven suttas – *Maṅgala Sutta, Ratana Sutta, Metta Sutta, Khandha Sutta, Mora Sutta, Vaṭṭa Sutta, Dhajagga Sutta, Āṭānāṭiya Sutta, Aṅgulimāla Sutta, Bojjhaṅga Sutta, Pubbaṇha Sutta* – and would be a lovely addition to anyone's collection of Buddhist books.

"Bhikkhus, form is anattā (form is not soul or self). Were form soul, then this form would not lead to affliction, and one could have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form be not thus.' And since form is not soul, so it leads to affliction, and none can have it of form: 'Let my form be thus; let my form be not thus.'"

~ The Buddha

This book: **No Inner Core,** ***An Introduction to the Doctrine of Anattā*** (IJ016/98), is based on a collection of lectures on the Anattā doctrine given by Sayadaw U Sīlānanda. This doctrine is one of the most important teachings of Buddhism and the most distinctive feature of Buddhism for, as many scholars have recognized, it makes Buddhism different from all other religions. Although the anattā doctrine is so important, so distinctive, and supposedly so universally accepted by Buddhists, it is still the most misunderstood, the most misinterpreted, and the most distorted of all the teachings of the Buddha. Some scholars who have written on Buddhism had a great respect for the Buddha, liked His teachings, revered Him, and honored Him, but they could not imagine that such a profound thinker had actually denied the existence of a soul. The author provides a technical exposition on this topic.

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